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ABSTRACT

Peer helping is a system of delivering service to young people who do not seek it from traditional sources. The peer helping program teaches young people to help fellow students solve personal problems, to demonstrate positive social skills, and to serve as role models in social situations. Training, which initially uses discussion and group dynamics so that students learn from the method as well as from the content, is open to all willing students and requires 30 to 40 hours during the semester. It entails a sequence of sessions preparing students to help lonely, isolated, alienated, or socially handicapped peers. It also helps make students aware of their own relationships with others. A second training phase is practicum-centered, being structured around specific helping situations such as helping a peer find a guidance counselor or implementing school programs dealing with specific youth concerns. The basic concern of peer helping is to improve social interactions. (MSF)

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Tips for Principals

January 1994

How To Establish a Student Peer Counseling Program

Today's young people struggle with emerging emotions, dramatic conflicts, and increasing responsibility for their own lives. They often approach social survival with low self-esteem and poor communication skills. Many are confused about life values, resent the lack of power in their own lives, and are uncertain—even afraid—about the future.

Peer counselors or peer helpers are an effective way for teens to help themselves and each other. This program is a two-way winner. Participants learn skills to effectively manage their lives and simultaneously reach out to others in a supportive, meaningful way.

The Iowa Department of Education uses the following peer counseling program, which could be adapted in any school.

✓ The Peer Helping Program

Peer helping is a training experience in which young people:

- Learn to help fellow students solve personal problems
- Demonstrate positive social skills
- Serve as role models in social situations.

Peer helping is a system of delivering service to young people who, for one reason or another, do not seek help from traditional sources. Peer helpers work toward bridging the gap between students and adults through friendship and respect.

It is anticipated that:

- Trained peer helpers will improve their own social interaction skills
- Trained peer helpers will be able to use problem-solving skills personally and to help others
- A peer helper program will increase the opportunity for more young people to interact one-on-one with someone else to help solve personal problems or relieve stress situations
- More young people will be aware of helping services and be comfortable using them.

Program success is related to adequate planning and support from the administration, the board of education, staff members, and representatives of programs that may be affected by the peer helping program.

Helping agencies, churches, and community intervention services can promote the concept to others and provide peer program planners with additional perspectives and resources.

✓ Phase I: Initial Training

Trainers or facilitators for peer helping must be committed to the concept and be willing to learn along with students. They also must set aside enough time to carry out their commitment to the program.

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themselves and each other.

The training team—usually two people—may be any combination of teachers, counselors, interested individuals, or trained students. Facilitators should complete a training program similar to that given to peer students. Regardless of the design, success is most directly correlated with a well-organized and systematic training program and opportunities for helping skills to be practiced and reinforced.

Training requires 30 to 40 hours during the semester; a two-hour or double period time block is desirable. Many schools offer peer counseling as an elective course during the regular school day. Any student who is willing to commit the time and work within the group guidelines should be

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given an opportunity to participate in basic peer training.

Peer training entails a sequential series of sessions that prepare students to help lonely, isolated, alienated, or socially handicapped peers. It also helps students better relate to their peers, become aware of their own relationship with others, and respect the experiences and feelings of others. As a result of the training, peer helpers are ready to listen, to offer understanding and confidentiality, and—when opportunities arise—to provide information or referral options.

Training sessions include:

- People and their interactions
- Helping skills: responsive listening, helpful questions, non-verbal communication, approaching those in need, decision making, and values
- Information about adolescent concerns: families, drugs and health, and peer relationships
- Referral resources and conflict management
- Simulated helping situations
- Advanced skills: conflict resolution, assertiveness training, feedback, and confrontation.

The training method uses discussion and group dynamics rather than group counseling. Students learn from the method as well as the content. No lecture materials are included in the session plans; instead, the points a facilitator wants to make come out of the discussion or examination of what

happened during the learning activity. Many lessons include optional homework or practice assignments so peer helpers can immediately apply skills to their personal lives.

✓Phase II: Practicum

The second phase is structured around specific helping situations and continued development of helping skills. Practicum sessions meet on a regular schedule—weekly, every two weeks, or as appropriate. The practicum phase includes:

- Planning and carrying out the helping experience
- Assessing or learning from the helping experience
- Improving or adding helping skills
- Finding support for a helping lifestyle.

Some formal helping experiences may include:

- Help another student of the same age find a guidance counselor or other peer counseling facilitator. These students might need help for a personal problem at home or school, might just need a friend, or might have a learning disability.
- Facilitate classroom discussions on special topics.
- Implement special school programs dealing with youth concerns such as alcohol and other drugs, family matters, or school climate.

- Conduct communications sessions for parents, teachers, and community groups.
- Be a peer helper with students returning to school after treatment for drug or alcohol abuse, family disruption, or medical circumstances.
- Help elementary school-age students by tutoring them, acting as a big brother/big sister, or leading discussion groups.
- Be available to talk with students serving in-school suspension.
- Visit elderly people in the community.
- Sponsor special community projects.
- Sponsor projects suggested by peer helpers.

Informally, each peer helper will have an opportunity to use his or her skills in daily interactions with parents and siblings, friends, and other adults. The basic premise of peer helping is to improve the quality of social interaction. Peers learn to recognize verbal and non-verbal messages for help. Simply reaching out is a peer-helping skill.

At the conclusion of the practicum, some students may be involved in an extension of services through the guidance department or youth agency. They may also be involved in training for succeeding cycles.

✓Ongoing Process

Peer helping does not end. After each training cycle, new peer helpers move among their friends and families with self-respect and respect for others.

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This Tips for Principals is based on an article by Mary O'Brien-Orman in the March 1993 issue of Leadership, published by NASSP's Division of Student Activities. Mary O'Brien-Orman teaches leadership, advises student council, and is a physical education specialist at Ottumwa (Iowa) High School.

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